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ABSTRACT

Punctuation, the original purpose of which was elocutionary, evolved a syntactic purpose as silent reading became more common. Despite the great similarity of punctuation rules among handbooks and manuals, punctuation has not been completely standardized. Punctuation practices vary from genre to genre, and the "best" fiction and nonfiction writers punctuate according to their needs, not according to the rules. If punctuation is looked at as a process rather than as product--that is, looked at as a matter of writer's intent--only two principles are needed to explain research on punctuation: (1) punctuate only to achieve clarity and/or effectiveness; and (2) use a hierarchy of six marks to show the nature and degree of separation. Systematizing the rules and emphasizing principles promises to make punctuation easier to learn. (RS)

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Some History

The original purpose of punctuation was elocutionary; oral reading, after all, was the medium for communicating written discourse. But as silent reading became common (after the invention of the printing press) a syntactic purpose evolved. These different—and mixed—purposes existed side by side for some time. The elocutionary purpose was illustrated by Elizabethan drama and *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the syntactic purpose was illustrated by Bacon's essays.

Although the latter purpose became predominant by the eighteenth century, prosodic purposes were always evident (Lupton, 1988). Indeed, the effort to specify prosodic-punctuational correspondences continues into the present (Webster 1961; Chafe, 1988). Our century, however, has seen the institutionalization of grammar-based rules in handbooks (in the education industry) and style manuals (in the print industry) (Cronnell, 1980). These basic resources refer to prosody rarely, and then only as a minor aid to the learner or an incidental guide to the practitioner.

At this century's end we are seeing, perhaps, the culmination of an evolution from "heavy" to "light" punctuation, a trend that began in earnest at the start of the century (with Fowlers' *The King's English*, according to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). The difference between the two can be seen by contrasting appropriate writers only half a century apart (Henry Adams and Ernest Hemingway or Robert Louis Stevenson and George Orwell). Present practice does not show all the "rests" and "pauses," as Bishop Lowth's 1762 grammar proposed; it proscribes the comma between subject and verb, and tolerates lighter punctuation between clauses. But contemporary writers who lean on punctuation for rhetorical effects (like Annie Dillard, for example) run counter to this trend.

The Rules

Punctuation rules deal with all the marks, of course, but punctuation studies are concerned with the "functional" marks. And statistical studies tell us that over 90% of the marks are periods and commas (slightly more commas than periods). So the comma requires more rules, and leads to more problems for the writer (Meyer, 1989). Though great numbers of handbooks and manuals have been printed in this century, the rules in all are essentially the same, and familiar to readers of this digest: rules for commas with words, phrases, and clauses (subordinating, coordinating, modifying) that typically are based on grammatical description but often dependent on semantic considerations.

Because of the great similarity among rule books, one might assume that punctuation has become standardized. Consider, however, that even experienced copy editors will not reach consensus on the application of certain rules (some uses of the dash, for example, or commas with independent clauses) (Cronnell, 1980). Moreover, differences among writers and genres (fiction and technical writing, for example) indicate that punctuation has not been completely standardized.

What Writers Do

The masses of daily and weekly publications are based on the prescriptions and proscriptions in such style manuals as *Words into Type* and *A Manual of Style*. So violations of the rules, which are not uncommon, are doubtless attributable more to the qualities of the copy editing than to stylistic decisions. Excepted from this generalization, naturally, are those few columnists who practice a unique writing style.

Learned writing—the nonfiction found in scholarly journals and periodicals such as *Harper's* and *The New Yorker*—is characterized by adherence to the rules. This can be attributed to copy editors' conscientious use of style manuals (most "learned" writers are not, after all, English teachers). So the punctuation found in this genre—if indeed it is one—suggests that punctuation norms are institutionalized wherever copy editors control the final copy.

Fiction is another matter, especially "quality" fiction. Such deliberate stylists as the "early" James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, E.M. Forster, Eudora Welty, and John Updike violate rules according to their needs or purposes. In *Dubliners* Joyce rarely uses a comma after an introductory word, phrase, or clause; Hemingway (chapter one of *A Farewell to Arms*) uses a comma between coordinate clauses only four of thirteen opportunities; Welty's clean sentences prompt fewer comma possibilities than, say Updike's, but clearly she is guided by more than mere adherence to the rules (Chafe, 1987). Updike, though conservative in his nonfiction, bends the rules to his needs in his fiction with fragments, comma splices, coordinate clauses without commas, ellipted coordinate clauses with commas, and more.

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The punctuation in "literary" nonfiction appears to be much like the punctuation in fiction, a conclusion based on studying the writing of Americans like Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, Loren Eiseley, Tom Wolfe, and, somewhat earlier, H. L. Mencken and E. B. White; and studying the British, like Forster, Orwell, Evelyn Waugh, and Virginia Woolf, who are even more lax with the rules than the Americans (Partridge, 1953).

Two propositions suggest themselves: (1) punctuation practices vary from genre to genre, and (2) the "best" writers punctuate according to their needs, not according to the rules. Can we, then, generalize about such broad topics as "American" punctuation or "nonfiction" punctuation? And don't we need to ask which genres provide the needed models of "good" punctuation? Mass market publications? Literary nonfiction? Learned writing? Perhaps learners should be exposed to all?

Theory and Issues

Studies of punctuation are "product" based or "process" based. If product based, one can examine texts for data that support generalizations (rules and principles) to account for the data; or one can evaluate the data according to given criteria (rules and principles). The latter is the traditional task of English teachers. The former is the method of most students of punctuation; however, because the rules are a given in such studies (Summey, 1949; Carey, 1958; Quirk, *et al.*, 1985; Meyer, 1987), the generalizations amount to qualifications of the rules.

Meyer (1987), for example, concludes his descriptive study with a chart specifying "positions where rules of punctuation dictate that marks of punctuation be placed." These rules are supplemented by seven "principles" (three syntactic, two semantic, two prosodic) that provide a guide for application of the rules. But these principles are essentially a systematization of the qualifications in the standard studies.

In the most comprehensive examination of modern English, Quirk, *et al.* (1985) examine the statistical data on commas with **and** and **but** between coordinate clauses and conclude: "These results show we are dealing with tendencies which, while clear enough, are by no means rules.... (I)t is probable that the general truth that punctuation conforms to grammatical rather than rhetorical considerations is in fact overridden."

Two studies suggest that there is more promise, both theoretical and pedagogical, in an approach that downplays the rules and emphasizes, in their stead, principles. Limaye (1983) proposes a simpler systematization of punctuation by identifying three principles underlying the given rules and adding two more ("non-canonical" word order and a hierarchy of four marks).

Dawkins' (1992) approach is even simpler. He assumes that writers have an intuitive sense of the independent clause and of a hierarchy of six marks. And he suggests that semantic intent, not the rules, is the actual basis for the punctuation of the "best" writers.

If punctuation is looked at as process rather than as product—that is, looked at as a matter as writer's intent—only two principles are needed to explain the data: (1) punctuate only to achieve clarity and/or effectiveness, and (2) use the hierarchy of six marks (these include "zero") to show the nature and degree of separation.

Pedagogical Implications

Except in concocted workbook exercises, it is often difficult, and sometimes impossible, to clearly match one's sentence with a rule (especially if one is a student). Moreover, the punctuation decision in a given context may depend on considerations that cross sentence boundaries—where rules don't go (Dawkins, 1992).

It is obvious, too, that studying "unrelated rules" leads to "rote learning," as Limaye (1983) says, and worse, perhaps, to the right/wrong attitude about punctuation that exists among students (indeed, among most people who write anything at all). This negative attitude leads to writing behavior whose purpose is to avoid "bad" writing, not to create "good" writing. Systematizing the rules and emphasizing principles promises to make punctuation easier to learn, partly because this approach appeals to one's reason, semantic intentions, and sense of rhetorical effectiveness rather than to one's need to be "right" according to a set of unsystematized rules.

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